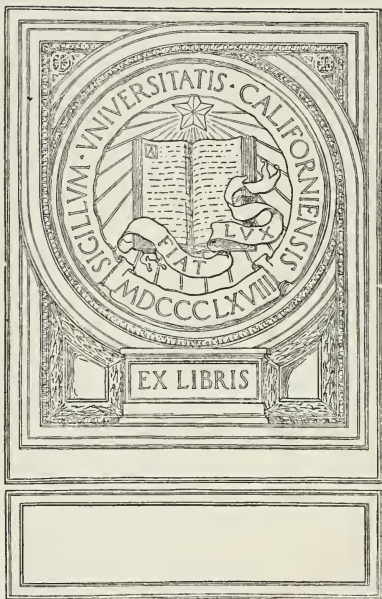


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THOMAS HARDY

THOMAS HARDY

THE ARTIST, THE MAN AND THE
DISCIPLE OF DESTINY

A LECTURE
DELIVERED BEFORE LA SOCIÉTÉ INTERNATIONALE
DE PHILOGIE, SCIENCE ET BEAUX-ARTS, ON
APRIL 11, 1921

BY
A. STANTON WHITFIELD

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
THE HON. SIR JOHN ALEXANDER
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TO
J. A. C.
WITH RESPECT AND
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NOTE

This lecture is printed at the request of several friends and acquaintances. The author would wish to say that the ideas presented herein form his conception of Thomas Hardy. To his Chairman, for kindly interest and encouragement, his gratitude is due. The author is also under obligation to Mr. Thomas Hardy, who readily gave him permission to make quotations from the Wessex Novels and Poems.

A. S. W.

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INTRODUCTION

BY

THE HON. SIR JOHN A. COCKBURN

K.C.M.G., M.D.

MR. WHITFIELD in his most interesting lecture has brought the sweet singer of the West very near to us. He has not only delighted us with a description of Thomas Hardy's works but has given us, as it were, a personal introduction to the man himself; whom to know is to love. Never did heart beat more kindly for all creation. His joy in the abounding and perfect life of the countryside is contrasted with his infinite compassion for human failings.

‘ Could we but find our being’s clue,
And live as birds and flowers do,’

says Lowell. Possibly the aspiring central shoot of human evolution may eventually reach a perfection such as that of the terminal twigs in the genealogical tree, which may be taken to represent those fellow-creatures whom we call the lower animals. Our eyes have been opened to the sense of good and evil, but we have not tasted the healing fruit of the tree of life. Mr. Whitfield's description of Thomas Hardy as a

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great classic is undoubtedly correct. He regards events in the clear light of the Greek poets. We now see what is meant by his title 'disciple of destiny.' Immutable law and Destiny stand supreme as rocks against which the waves of passion and desire beat in vain. This is in wholesome contrast to the fashionable vogue of romanticists who, disregarding the inevitable influences of heredity and environment, magnify the human will into a paramount power. A fiction that makes each actor consider himself as the star of the stage and resembles the conceit of the geocentric theory of the universe, wherein the earth is regarded as the object round which the heavens moved. It is chiefly from an exaggerated idea of self-importance that the disappointments, chagrins and regrets to which the human race is heir owe their origin. Thomas Hardy invites us into a partnership with nature whereby our satisfactions are multiplied and our sorrows assuaged. Through the medium of Mr. Whitfield we have, this afternoon, been privileged to walk and talk with one of the immortals of our land.

It was one of the gratifying features of the age that men of letters were held in high esteem. Among the few who had been enrolled in the Order of Merit the name of Thomas Hardy was pre-eminent as a novelist and poet. During the strain and stress of the last few years, works of fiction had been in great demand. When the burden of actual life pressed too heavily, it was a relief to be able to soar into the realms of imagination. From the physiological point of view there were two circuits of nerve currents. The lower supplied the innervation necessary for locomotion and the

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functions of animal life. It pervaded the body at large. The higher and smaller functioned within the brain. The scheme resembled a figure of 8, or rather the small upper and large lower rounds of a cottage loaf. It was possible by an effort of the will to cut off the grosser current and revel in the spacious freedom of the abstract. Philosophy furnished, for the few, facilities for such a flight, but for the great majority the golden ladder was provided by fiction. The debt of mankind to the great novelists was infinite. They had listened with pleasure and instruction to the remarks of Mr. Whitfield, who was an Oxford man conversant with the beautiful part of the country from which Thomas Hardy received many of his inspirations.

I

THE ARTIST AND THE PHILOSOPHY UNDERLYING HIS WORKS

I BELIEVE that the best way of approach to the work of a creative genius is from the artistic standpoint, and that all other methods of approach are by-paths. I shall therefore endeavour, in so far as is practicable, throughout my paper to regard Thomas Hardy as an artist.

From the view-point of artistry his work falls into two divisions—descriptive and interpretative—or, less strictly and conveniently into three : His descriptions of nature, analyses of character, and interpretation of Life. His general characteristics should first be noted, leaving the dominant notes for later consideration.

In sheer artistry there are no novels like Thomas Hardy's. It is true, for instance, that Jane Austen's novels are inimitable in style and in *their* form. In those of the Wessex novelist it is in form itself that they are nearly perfect, by which is meant that in them there is a chromatic blending of everything. In proof of this look into *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. What do you find ? The scenes are parts of the action, as well as of the substance of the novel. Tess begins her life in a quiet and remote village. It is beneath the yews

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and oaks of the Chase of Cranbourne that she becomes 'maiden no more.' In the beauty of Blackmoor and Froom she absorbs herself into that love which is her life. Thence to the old, mouldy, sinister manor-house at Wellbridge, where Angel Clare is filled with repulsion against her innocent indiscretion. At the height of her despair she is placed in the grim hardness of the sterile Flintcombe Ash. The last scene of all that ends her strange eventful history is at Stonehenge, near the sacrificial altar of the old Gods, where she is seized by the merciless officers of the law. Thus the metaphysic is symbolized in the character of everything just as much as it is expressed, for instance, in Michelangelo's *Dawn* or *Night*.

This artistic method of treatment of scene and subject is Mr. Hardy's style, in 'as far as the word is meant to mean something more than literary finish.' There is no ornamentation or deliberate affectation in his style. It is concise, dignified, sincere, unstrained, and unpretentious. He tells his tales on a plane equal to the situation, but whenever a great occurrence or scene arises he is ready for the occasion. He is not an artist for the sake of artistry, like Pater or Meredith, although he has a remarkable natural gift of lyric expression. Here is the breath of fancy making music :—

'Tess was conscious of neither time nor space. The exaltation which she had described as being producible at will by gazing at a star came now without any determination of hers. She undulated upon the thin notes as upon billows, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears to her eyes. The floating pollen seemed to be his notes made visible, and

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the dampness of the garden, the weeping of the garden's sensibility. Though near nightfall, the rank-smelling weed-flowers glowed as if they would not close for intentness, and the waves of colour mixed with the waves of sound.'

Hardy is not a romantic. He is too observant to be romantic. Life is a problem to him ; not a romance. Jane Austen was observant, but then her age so successfully veneered with artificiality that it is difficult to know what to think of certain of her characters. Although a realist, there is delicacy and beauty in his realism. There is to be found in him none of that coarse brutality and indelicacy which is characteristic of the French realists.

It is perhaps as an interpreter of nature that the Wizard of Wessex best exhibits his greatness as an artist. He does not, like Mr. Kipling, relate his musings in a beer-den which reeks with the stinks of discarded cigarette ends. He goes into the sadness of the silence of the open air—on the horizon next to eternity—and dwarfs the 'laureate of the Empire' into a mere music-hall comedian. In the *Return of the Native*, a characteristic specimen of our author's prose-work, this breath of the open air is exemplified. Only in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* do we have an approaching picture of Nature aggressively pitting herself against man. In both we hear the howling and wuthering of the wind as a wild musical metre. The picture of Egdon Heath is like *The Entry of the Gods of Wagner*.¹ The characters seem to exhibit, on a

¹ In *Das Rheingold*.

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smaller scale, the varying qualities of it. Eustacia is pagan as the heath is old, and the nobility of the Reddleman is only transcended by its magnificence. You find the same blending of man and nature if you turn to any of Hardy's great novels. In *The Woodlanders*, the plot of which is very similar to that of the *Return of the Native*, Marty South blends with the charm of the woodland and mingles with the wood-notes of birds. Indeed, as Beethoven says, 'Nature knows no quiescence; and true art walks with her hand in hand.'

If we view our author as an interpreter of character we shall find him to be neither satirist nor caricaturist; a not unexpected trait from one who believes in the intermingling of the elemental forces of Nature and human life. Irony is his *forte*: Michael Henchard¹ is a sinless, impulsive, wrong-headed man. Henry Knight² is the cynic who views life in the abstract. This irony is at times fused into a terrible destiny; that destiny which is responsible for the soul-tragedy common to both Shakespeare and Hardy. Antony's soul is dissolved by his enslavement to Cleopatra; Hamlet, 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,' is blasted by his irresolute will and soul bewilderment. The purity of Tess blasted into impurity is horrifying. Sue Bridehead is soul-shrivelled into lunacy by fear, blunder, and sorrow. However, these terrible tragedies are relieved and softened by the introduction of those rustics who will always be associated with the name of Shakespeare. With their predominant sense

¹ In *Mayor of Casterbridge*. ² In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*.

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of humour these delightful rural paintings blend with and brighten the tragic novels. This sense of humour, from another aspect, is all-pervading: Are not the tragedies the comedies of the gods? "Justice" was done and the President of the Immortals (in Æschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess.'

'Dark is the realm of grief, but human things
Those may not know who cannot weep for them.'

SHELLEY.

A good deal more than is necessary has been said about the philosophy of the author of *Jude the Obscure*. The truth is that there is no deliberate philosophy in his work. He is primarily an artist concerned with certain aspects of life. His pen, he says, has never advanced positive views on 'the Whence and Wherefore of things . . . as a consistent philosophy.' His sentiments 'have been stated truly to be mere impressions of the moment, and not convictions or arguments.' He does not postulate any theory of life, but presents his theatre. It is we who read into, or draw out, the philosophy in his work. He has 'a sight for the finer qualities of existence, an ear for the "still sad music of humanity."' He recognised what De Quincey called 'the deep tragedy of human life' and presented it to us, and after all, as a modern minor poet (John Drinkwater) says,

'He serves us best who sings but as he sees,'

which is a concise rendering of a paragraph in the preface to the collected edition of Mr. Hardy's works:

'Differing natures find their tongue in the presence

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of differing spectacles. Some natures become vocal at tragedy, some are made vocal by comedy, and it seems to me that to whichever of these aspects of life a writer's instinct for expression the more readily responds, to that he should allow it to respond.'

✧ Like Schopenhauer he felt 'from the first the trouble of existence; and here he finds the deepest motive for the desire to become clear about it.'¹ We are all at some time or other placed into circumstances against which strife is unavailing, much as we would like to deny that it is so. 'In everything in nature there is something of which no explanation is possible, no cause further to be sought,'² which Hardy, like Schopenhauer, thought to be 'the manifestation of a blindly striving will or feeling rather than a reason.'³

Dualism—God and the Devil; good and evil—was the philosophy that permeated Victorian literature. Hardy was one of the early few who questioned this tradition. He admits neither absolute good or evil—here or hereafter. He finds a thing called the Will—neither good nor evil—but rather more malevolent than benevolent. We are to him puppets in the hands of a blind power against which we struggle: That is his personal philosophy, but, as stated above, he did not write to record deliberately or present any philosophy of life. He wrote as an artist, in various moods, to present his ideas of the world; to present the truth as it appeared to him. Indeed, he says, 'At the dates

¹ Whittaker's *Schopenhauer*, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

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represented in the various narrations things were like that in Wessex . . . just as they are shown.'

Now we all know that Thomas Hardy's outlook on life is a sombre one. He has been called a pessimist. In truth he cannot be called a pessimist, even though his attitude towards life be pessimistic. No man with such an innate love of nature could be a pessimist. The true pessimist is the type of Swift who saw man as a mean, low, degraded thing, and who felt life too hideous to describe. Poor Swift was a pessimist because in an unimaginative age he was a man of imagination and passion. Hardy, no doubt, would agree with Sophocles 'that not to have been born is best of all,' but, being born, he is the first to see the beauty, grace, and charm of life. He sees it infinitely beautiful and infinitely sad. It is because he feels how beautiful it is that he sees how much greater are earthly sorrows. It is this pitying attitude towards life and its tremendous tragedies that sometimes makes him somewhat akin to the Astronomer Poet of Persia :—

' Ah, Love ! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Remould it nearer to the Heart's Desire ? '

He knows how impossible that is, and he believes in making the best of good spirits.

' Men thin away to insignificance quite as often by not making the most of good spirits when they have them, as by lacking good spirits when they are indispensable.'¹

¹ *Far from the Madding Crowd.*

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Indeed, if optimism is a belief in humanity's powers to love and to endure, then Mr. Hardy might be described as an optimist. But he could never justify the existence of that sheer optimism which proclaims that 'God's in His heaven, all's right with the world.' That consolation is left for those who are able to feel only the superficial veneer of happiness; not so Hardy, whose soul is wrung with pity for the agonies of life, and who is always in revolt against evil.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* one of the lesser characters,¹ in a pitiful state, is helped by a dog to a place of safety. Regaining consciousness, she asks, 'Where is the dog? He helped me.' A man standing by, unknowing, said, 'I stoned him away.' *There* is the sadness in life which surpasseth human understanding. Mr. Hardy's work is one long plea against it. Like Shelley he has consciously injured no bird, beast, or insect, but 'still loved and cherished these my kindred.'² Yet these things are injured and things do go wrong; the wicked prosper and the good are cursed. 'Where is justice, what is justice?' he says, and he seeks in vain to find it in nature.

The most tangible representatives of the ultimate aim, whatever it be, are heredity and environment—the modern counterparts of the Furies of the Greek dramas—and these two things often drive persons to deeds of unintentional evil, or even self-destruction. Thus he finds God to be a blind Immanent Will—a sort of careless Fate or tendency to which we are subjected—which responds to no human appeal. It is a

¹ Fanny Robin.

² *Alastor*, line 14.

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blind force that guides us somehow ; a thing that labours 'all-unknowingly,' since we never consciously feel ourselves to be mere marionettes. That is what It must be. How else could It be so unfair in Its punishments or rewards ? Thus his outlook is temperamentally one of pity. When poor Tess, whose dust we all weep o'er 'and say, Here lies

To love and Fate an equal sacrifice,'

when poor Tess is sacrificed, his anger seems to be kindled, and he flings his taunt into the face of the injurious God, as though to tell Him that this world equalled His until he'd taken its jewels. "Justice" was done, and the President of the Immortals (in *Æschylean* phrase) had ended his sport with Tess.' One gentleman, we are told, 'turned Christian for half an hour the better to express his grief over that disrespectful phrase.'

The sombre vein in literature is almost unaccountable. In the main it is purely personal. It is a sad, amiable weakness which runs in the blood of some men: in that of Keats, Turgenev, and Thackeray, and almost absent in others, like Scott, Dickens, or Tennyson. It is the outcome of an intensely human, sympathetic disposition whose goddess is melancholia : 'The Melancholia that transcends all wit,' who 'dwells with beauty—beauty that must die,' and who 'has her sovran shrine' 'in the very temple of Delight.'

As Shelley says : 'Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good. Our sympathy in tragic fiction depends on this principle ; tragedy delights by

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affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain. This is the source also of the melancholy which is inseparable from the sweetest melody. The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself. And hence the saying, *It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the House of mirth.*¹

Time is fleeting and I must not dally longer on the Artist. I must turn to the Man. I have tried to show that Thomas Hardy is not a writer for moral cowards and mental invalids. He annoys them. His message from the heights is to those who wish to face life as it is, to see its problems, and to arouse their activity by presenting the tale of woe, nevertheless, in the words of Matthew Arnold :—

‘ I say : Fear not ! Life still
Leaves human effort scope.
But, since life teems with ill,
Nurse no extravagant hope :
Because thou must not dream, thou
need’st not then despair.’¹

¹ *Empedocles on Etna*. (Poetical Works, 1890, p. 457.)

II

THE MAN

IN the Church of Saint Peter, in Dorchester, is a tablet 'To the memorye of Thomas Hardy, of Melcombe Regis, in the Covnty of Dorset esqvier whoe endowed this Burrovghe wth a yearely revenew of 50 L; & he appoynted ovt of it, to be employed for y^e better mayntenance of a preacher 20 L. ; a school-master twenty Powndes ; an husher twenty nobles ; the alms women five markes. The Baylives & Burgisses of Dorchester, in testimony of their gratitvde, & to commend to posteritie an example soe worthy of imitation, have erected this monvment. . . . The jvst shall be had in everlasting remembrance.' This worthy, who died in 1599, was a scion of a Jersey family and the ancestor of the Novelist.

More than eighty years ago—on the 2nd of June, 1840—Thomas Hardy was born. In disposition he is particularly reserved and enigmatic, and in consequence thereof little is known of his private life. His father was a Dorchester builder, who resided at the little village of Higher Bockhampton, some distance from the county town. His mother, who died in her ninetyeth year, was a woman of character and marked

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ability. She came from Melbury Osmund and, like Shakespeare's mother, was of good old yeoman stock. She it was who introduced her son to literature, and in his twelfth year gave him a copy of Dryden's *Virgil*—one of her favourite works. He began his education at the local schools, and between the years 1852–6 his mother procured for him instruction in Latin and French.

In the four following years he read Latin and Greek with a friend. His parents wished him to enter the Church: he was destined to do other things. In 1857 he was articled to a Mr. Hicks—an ecclesiastical architect of Dorchester, with whom he did much work in connection with church restoration, which was the craze of that period. For three years he worked by day with Mr. Hicks, and by night burned the midnight oil over the good literature which he voraciously devoured. Ah! there he is, in the mind's eye, trudging through the meadow-track to his secluded home situated, as it were, in the centre of the panorama of Nature. . . . He has now disappeared behind the little wicket gate whereon is daubed the warning 'Woe unto the Wicked; it shall be ill with him.'

Moreover, the young apprentice did not spend all his evening indoors, and his architectural tours quickened his natural powers of observation. Like Crabbe, whom Byron called 'Nature's sternest poet and her best,' he loved

'The village life, and every care that reigns
O'er youthful peasants and declining swains,'¹

¹ *Village*, lines 1 and 2.

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because 'Tis good to know . . . these turns and movements of the human Heart.' He knew some of them well ; indeed, he used to write love-letters for some of the village girls. It is suggested that these and similar ingredients remained in his mind in a sub-conscious way 'only waiting for the heat of creation to bring them out.'

Just as you find the influence of Mr. Hardy's architectural apprenticeship pervading most of his novels, so you find in two of the characters in his first published book, *Desperate Remedies*, a reflection of our author's personality, and a picture of him during his sojourn with John Hicks. He was

'frank and gentle. He had a quality of thought which, exercised on homeliness, was humour ; on nature, picturesqueness ; on abstractions, poetry. Being, as a rule, broadcast, it was all three. Of the wickedness of the world he was too forgetful. To discover evil in a new friend is to most people only an additional experience : to him it was ever a surprise.'

'I think he's a very worthy fellow ; there's no non-sense in him, and though he is not a public school man, he has read widely, and has a sharp appreciation of what's good in books and art. In fact, his knowledge isn't nearly so exclusive as most professional men's.'

'That's a great deal to say of an architect, for of all professional men they are, as a rule, the most professional.'

'Yes ; perhaps they are. This man is rather of a melancholy turn of mind, I think.'

'He has dark hair, almost a Grecian nose, regular

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teeth, and an intellectual face. . . . He is rather untidy in his waistcoat, and neckties, and hair. . . . He's a thorough book-worm—despises the pap-and-daisy school of verse—knows Shakespeare to the very dregs of the footnotes. Indeed, he's a poet himself in a small way.'¹

'Quickly acquiring any kind of knowledge he saw around him, and having a plastic adaptability more common in woman than in man, he changed colour like a chameleon as the society he found himself in assumed a higher and more artificial tone. He had not many original ideas, and yet there was scarcely an idea to which, under proper training, he could not have added a respectable co-ordinate.' . . . '*Could not have added a respectable co-ordinate*': What modesty in that phrase !

In his twentieth year Mr. Hardy went to London, to follow up his profession as an architect, where he worked under Sir Arthur Blomfield, the distinguished architect of the modern Gothic school. In the evenings he pursued his classical studies, at King's College. He applied himself seriously to his profession, and in 1863 he was awarded the prize and medal of the Institute of British Architects for an essay on *Coloured Brick and Terra-Cotta Architecture*, and in the same year he gained the Tate prize for architectural design. It has been stated that, after these successes, Mr. Hardy thought of becoming an art critic ; certainly throughout his work there are many similes between canvasses and characters. He followed his profession for about

¹ *Desperate Remedies*, pp. 23-4-5.

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ten years longer, after which he happily abandoned it for the more precarious one of literature. The years 1865-67 was the period of indecision in which he wavered and hesitated between literature and architecture. He sojourned alternately in London and Weymouth. He worked at his profession and at the same time wrote a novel. In 1865 his first story, *How I Built Myself a House*, appeared in *Chambers' Magazine*. It is remarkable for nothing but its insignificance.

He practised the writing of verse round about the same period. The album verse in *Desperate Remedies* was his first poem to appear in print. The sonnet called *Her Reproach*, written at this time, at Westbourne Park Villas, seems to have a personal significance :—

‘ Con the dead page as ’twere live love : press on.
Cold wisdom’s words will ease thy track for thee ;
Aye, go ; cast off sweet ways, and leave me wan
To biting blasts that are intent on me.

But if thy object Fame’s far summits be,
Whose inclines many a skeleton overlies
That missed both dream and substance, stop and see
How absence wears these cheeks and dims these
eyes !

It surely is far sweeter and more wise
To water love, than toil to leave anon
A name whose glory-gleam will but advise
Invidious minds to dull it with their own,
And over which the kindest will but stay
A moment ; musing, “ He, too, had his day ! ” ’

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Desperate Remedies was published anonymously in 1871. It was read and commended by George Meredith. Hardy had previously submitted another manuscript, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, which also fell into the hands of his distinguished contemporary who accepted it but suggested that the young man should write something less extravagant and with more 'plot' in it. The result, as we know, was nearly all plot. Mr. Hardy's first novel never will be published. There is good reason to believe that it has been destroyed.

Desperate Remedies was followed by *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and in the meanwhile their author became attached to Emma Lavinia Gifford, whom he married in 1874 and who died in 1912. It was to her that the poet dedicated the *Ditty* dated 1870, beginning :—

‘Beneath a knap where flown
Nestlings play,
Within walls of weathered stone,
Far away
From files of formal houses,
By the bough the firstling browses,
Lives a Sweet : no merchants meet,
No man barter, no man sells
Where she dwells.’

And ending :—

‘To feel I might have kissed—
Loved as true—
Otherwhere, nor Mine have missed
My life through,

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Had I never wandered near her,
Is a smart severe—severer
In the thought that she is nought,
Even as I, beyond the dells
Where she dwells.

And Devotion droops her glance,
To recall
What bond-servants of Chance
We are all.

I but found her in that, going
On my errant path unknowing,
I did not out-skirt the spot
That no spot on earth excels,
—Where she dwells !’

In the year of their marriage Mr. Hardy published *Far from the Madding Crowd* and definitely abandoned architecture for literature. *The Spectator*, searching for some genius to whom it might attach the new book, accused George Eliot of perpetrating it. Mr. Hardy says that the character of Bathsheba Everdine in it was drawn from one of his aunts, and that he knew Gabriel Oak quite well as a boy.

The Hardys visited France for a brief time, lived first at Sturminster Newton, then moved to London, from thence to Wimborne, and finally Mr. Hardy built, on the site of a Roman villa just out of Dorchester, the house in which he now resides. Once again in his native place he became friendly with his neighbour William Barnes, the celebrated Dorset dialect poet. Many were the stories of country life and bygone

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characters that passed between them and many a laugh they had together. There was the story of the boy who 'scrope out the "p" in psalm, 'cos 'e didn't spell nothin'.' Then Barnes would be reminded of some other joke : perhaps the one he once made with a yokel about a donkey. The poet and labourer met once later, and the latter, reminding Barnes of the story, said, 'I never zee a donkey, sir, but what I do think o' you.'

After the appearance of the *Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Mr. Hardy's fame and name was made for all time. With that tremendous tragedy *Jude the Obscure* his prose work ended, and many thought his work finished. But he had yet to fulfil his poetic intention. This modest little man was ever enigmatic, and in a few years he surprised us with two slight volumes of verse. A greater thing was to come, for, upon the appearance of *The Dynasts*, the literary world, to borrow a metaphor of Froude, 'vibrated like electric wires in a thunderstorm.' Even then his splendour was not at an end, and perhaps we did not discover his true lyrical note until the publication of his last three volumes of poetry.

Thomas Hardy wears the hall-mark of modesty ; not the one which is so characteristic of Mr. George Bernard Shaw. In manner he is unassuming and in figure slight, so that, upon seeing him for the first time, Mr. H. G. Wells said, in amazement, 'What ? That little grey man !' And there Mr. Wells joins hands with a Dorchester barber. 'Such a quiet little man,' he said. 'You'd never know it was Thomas

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Hardy. 'E wears such an old overcoat and such a baggy umbrella! I never want t' read his books. Americans seem to think a lot of him. One says to me not long ago: "Seen Thomas Hardy?" "Oh, yes," says I. "He sat in the chair you're sitting in." "In *this* chair?" shouted the Yank, no end excited. "Yes," I says. "I cut Mr. Hardy's hair." "Did you keep the hair you cut off?" "No," I says. "Well," he said, "that's a pity, 'cos I'd have bought it."

He has always kept away from the madding crowd, which makes no appeal to the sensitive temperament. Do not his prefaces show how much he has been hurt by unkind strictures on some of his views? Sensitive people are usually kindly and sympathetic at heart, and he himself has said that his books are but 'one plea against "man's inhumanity to man," to woman—and to the lower animals.'

It is a privilege to have so illustrious a man with us. It is satisfying to know that several of our universities have honoured themselves by honouring Dr. Thomas Hardy, and it is gratifying to know that the State, usually parsimonious and misguided in matters of art, has, in bestowing the Order of Merit upon one of the greatest of living men of letters, for once illumined itself.

III

NOVELS

I NEED hardly say that in the brief time of a mere lecture hour I can touch only lightly upon certain aspects of my subject. I shall not endeavour to make any consistent or detailed account of Thomas Hardy's novels and poems. To the greatest of the former and the greatest of the latter many lecture hours could be well devoted. It is beyond both my scope and capacity to attempt such an audacious task.

The action of Hardy's novels closely resembles that of the ancient Greek Dramas. The predominant factor in Greek art was the law of proportion—a law which is worked out evenly throughout our artist's work. You find Destiny pursuing its victims in his novels and poems quite as surely as it pursued the Œdipus of Sophocles. The pathos and nobility of human character are thrown in relief against a background of unpitiful Fate. His rustics and milk-maids stand aside and gaze in pity upon the scene, like a Greek chorus. There is a phrase in *The Woodlanders* which seems to show that our author would be in agreement with this idea of his work—that his novels form a field where 'from time to time dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real.'

His first novel, *Desperate Remedies*, mentioned above,

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was written under the influence of Wilkie Collins, whose novels were at that time (1871) in vogue. It seems to stand aside from the other novels. 'The principles observed in its composition are, no doubt, too exclusively those in which mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral obliquity are depended on for exciting interest.'¹

It may be convenient to divide his work, apart from the short stories, into romances, comedies, and tragedies, although they all bear the tragic impress, and some of them bear all three of these characteristics. The romances are : that 'rural painting of the Dutch School,' *Under the Greenwood Tree*, which is a charming prelude to the later tragedies, ending only with a lie on the lips of its heroine. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, a work so familiar that its mention precludes further comment. *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 'a misty and shady blue that had no beginning or surface, and was looked *into* rather than *at*.' *The Trumpet Major and Robert his Brother* is a romantic melody tinged with sadness. Like *A few Crusted Characters*, it breathes of the spirit of England. It is a happy, pathetic, landscape. The charming heroine is confronted by two brothers ; a sailor and a soldier. The latter is a worthy honest fellow, but somehow she cannot resist the lure of his genial sailor-gallant brother, and the Trumpet Major 'turned on the doorstone, backed by the black night ; and in another moment he had plunged into the darkness, the ring of his smart step dying away upon the bridge as he joined his companion-in-arms, and went

¹ Prefatory Note (1889) to *Desperate Remedies*.

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off to blow his trumpet till silenced for ever upon one of the bloody battle-fields of Spain.'

The Woodlanders is perhaps the most touching of the romances. It is like *The Shepherd's Calendar* in its expression of the phenomena of the seasons. The country and the open air are the influences that pervade the whole book, and it is not easy to forget Marty South, who is one of the most lovable characters in the whole of English fiction. Ben Jonson would have called her 'The plant and flower of light.'

The earliest of the comedies was *The Hand of Ethelberta*, which Mr. Hardy places in his 'Novels of Ingenuity.' It is called a comedy in chapters, and is the story of a long and brave fight of a butler's daughter to conceal her birth and keep her place in the social circle to which she had arisen. *A Laodicean* was written during illness in 1880, and *Two on a Tower* two years later.

The Well-Beloved is Mr. Hardy's only light and fantastic tale, but even here the 'fantastic' is atoned for by its author's keen powers of observation. As a study of Portland, its people, manners and customs, it is valuable. Last year, when travelling by train, I accidentally became engaged in conversation with the wife of a Portland jailor. She was a woman of about sixty years of age and, being addicted, as are many of her sex, to conversation, she told me many interesting features of Portland life. I was so astonished at her faithfulness to Hardy's descriptions, that I asked her if she had ever read *The Well-Beloved*. The lady had never even heard of Thomas Hardy!

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No doubt you are all familiar with one or more of the great tragedies, *Jude the Obscure* (1894), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), or *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). The first-named of these achieved the distinction of being burned by a bishop, probably in his despair at not being able to burn Mr. Hardy. Maybe it was the Bishop of Melchester. On its first appearance it was violently reviewed, and one zealous lady mistook it for anti-marriage propaganda. The critics have "gone down into silence," as if to remind 'them' 'of the infinite unimportance of their say.' Nevertheless Mr. Hardy said that the experience completely cured him of further interest in novel writing. Guided by the artistry of Æschylus and permeated by the essentials of Ecclesiastes, I believe *Jude the Obscure*, in its profound and unfathomable depths of gloom and greatness, to be unsurpassed by any novel in the history of our literature.

The Mayor of Casterbridge is a wonderful psychological study of 'a man of character.' Something has already been said of the artistic construction of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. It is a work which shows how much human character and nature's laws are terribly opposed to one another: Life in the main is a series of sexual disasters, and the measure of purity is in the soul, not in the flesh.

It was originally my intention to give a synopsis of *The Return of the Native*, this being one of the most characteristic of the Wessex Novels. I fear, however, that at this late moment in my story this would weary you, because it would be a lengthy business. In the

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manner of the skilful literary artist, as understood by Poe, Hardy opens his book with the idea of his pre-conceived effect : The ominous Heath of Egdon. It is like the working up of a main theme in an overture or sonata of Beethoven or Mozart. You not only read the contents of this book ; you see them. The quarrel scene between Clym and Eustacia is an instance which shows Hardy's mastery of the secrets of human nature. It is only comparable to some scenes of Shakespeare—such as the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius. You see in it flashes of expression that are more expressive than pages : Wildeve was a man 'in whom no man would have seen anything to admire and in whom no woman would have seen anything to dislike.' I cannot resist the temptation of making two quotations from this book. One of them is a description of Egdon universal. It emphasises the overwhelming power of Heath, the real significance of which is not local but natural environment, but, terrible as it is, Hardy loves it for its beauty, dignity, and majesty. The other is a description of the chief feminine character—Eustacia Vye, who is to take her place in the car of life where, in Shelley's words,

‘ Maidens and youths . . .
Kindle invisibly, and as they glow,
Like moths by light attracted and repelled,
Oft to their bright destruction come and go,
Till . . .
. . . the fiery band that held
Their natures snaps.’¹

¹ *Triumph of Life*, line 150, etc.

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EGDON HEATH

‘ **A** SATURDAY afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment. Overhead the hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky was as a tent which had the whole heath for its floor.

‘ The heaven being spread with this pallid screen and the

majestic without severity, impressive
emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity. The
qualifications which frequently invest the façade of a prison
with far more dignity than is found in the façade of a palace
double its size lent to this heath a sublimity in which spots

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CORRIGENDUM

Page 36, line 16, *et seq.*, should read as follows :

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EGDON HEATH

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‘ The heaven being spread with this pallid screen and the earth with the darkest vegetation, their meeting-line at the horizon was clearly marked. In such contrast the heath wore the appearance of an instalment of night which had taken up its place before its astronomical hour was come : darkness had to a great extent arrived hereon, while day stood distinct in the sky. . . .

‘ The place became full of a watchful intentness now ; for when other things sank brooding to sleep the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen. Every night its Titanic form seemed to await something ; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crises of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one last crisis—the final overthrow.

‘ It was a spot which returned upon the memory of those who loved it with an aspect of peculiar and kindly congruity. Smiling champagnes of flowers and fruit hardly do this, for they are permanently harmonious only with an existence of better reputation as to its issues than the present. Twilight combined with the scenery of Egdon Heath to evolve a thing majestic without severity, impressive without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity. The qualifications which frequently invest the façade of a prison with far more dignity than is found in the façade of a palace double its size lent to this heath a sublimity in which spots

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renowned for beauty of the accepted kind are utterly wanting. Fair prospects wed happily with fair times ; but alas, if times be not fair ! Men have oftener suffered from the mockery of a place too smiling for their reason than from the oppression of surroundings over-sadly tinged. Haggard Egdon appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently learnt emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair.

‘ Indeed, it is a question if the exclusive reign of this orthodox beauty is not approaching its last quarter. The new Vale of Tempe may be a gaunt waste in Thule : human souls may find themselves in closer and closer harmony with external things wearing a sombreness distasteful to our race when it was young. The time seems near, if it has not actually arrived, when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking of mankind. And ultimately to the commonest tourist, spots like Iceland may become what the vineyards and myrtle-gardens of South Europe are to him now ; and Heidelberg and Baden be passed unheeded as he hastens from the Alps to the sand-dunes of Scheveningen.

‘ The most thorough-going ascetic could feel that he had a natural right to wander on Egdon : he was keeping within the line of legitimate indulgence when he laid himself open to influences such as these. Colours and beauties so far subdued were, at least, the birthright of all. Only in summer days of the highest feather did its mood touch the level of gaiety. Intensity was more usually reached by way of the solemn than by way of the brilliant, and such a sort of intensity was often arrived at during winter darkness, tempests, and mists. Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity ; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend. Then it became the home of strange phantoms ; and it was found to be the hitherto unrecognised original of those wild regions of

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obscurity which are vaguely felt to be compassing us about in midnight dreams of flight and disaster, and are never thought of after the dream till revived by scenes like this.

‘It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man’s nature—neither ghastly, hateful or ugly : neither commonplace, unmeaning or tame ; but, like man, slighted and enduring ; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some persons who have long lived apart, solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities. . . .

‘Here at least were intelligible facts regarding landscape—far-reaching proofs productive of genuine satisfaction. The untameable, Ishmaelitish thing that Egdon now was it had always been. Civilization was its enemy ; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation. In its venerable one coat lay a certain vein of satire on human vanity in clothes. A person on a heath in raiment of modern cut and colours has more or less an anomalous look. We seem to want the oldest and simplest human clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive.

‘To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon, between afternoon and night, as now, where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New. The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea that it is old ? Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day,

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or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.’¹

EUSTACIA VYE

‘EUSTACIA VYE was the raw material of a divinity. On Olympus she would have done well with a little preparation. She had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess—that is, those which make not quite a model woman. Had it been possible for the earth and mankind to be entirely in her grasp for a while, had she handled the distaff, the spindle, and the shears at her own free will, few in the world would have noticed the change of government. There would have been the same inequality of lot, the same heaping up of favours here, of contumely there, the same generosity before justice, the same perpetual dilemmas, the same captious alternation of caresses and blows that we endure now.

‘She was in person full-limbed and somewhat heavy; without ruddiness, as without pallor; and soft to the touch as a cloud. To see her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow: it closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow.

‘Her nerves extended into those tresses, and her temper could always be softened by stroking them down. When her hair was brushed she would instantly sink into stillness and look like the Sphinx. . . .

‘She had Pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries. Their light, as it came and went, and came again, was partially hampered by their oppressive lids and lashes; and of these the under lid was much fuller than it usually is with English

¹ *Return of the Native*, Book I, Chap. I.

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women. This enabled her to indulge in reverie without seeming to do so : she might have been believed capable of sleeping without closing them up. Assuming that the souls of men and women were visible essences, you could fancy the colour of Eustacia's soul to be flame-like. The sparks from it that rose into her dark pupils gave the same impression . . .

' Her presence brought memories of such things as Bourbon roses, rubies, and tropical midnights ; her moods recalled lotus-eaters and the march in "Athalie" ; her motions, the ebb and flow of the sea ; her voice, the viola. In a dim light, and with a slight rearrangement of her hair, her general figure might have stood for that of either of the higher female deities. The new moon behind her head, an old helmet upon it, a diadem of accidental dewdrops round her brow, would have been adjuncts sufficient to strike the note of Artemis, Athena, or Hera respectively, with as close an approximation to the antique as that which passes muster on many respected canvasses. . . .

' To be loved to madness—such was her great desire. Love was to her the one cordial which could drive away the eating loneliness of her days. And she seemed to long for the abstraction called passionate love more than for any particular lover.

' She could show a most reproachful look at times, but it was directed less against human beings than against certain creatures of her mind, the chief of these being Destiny, through whose interference she dimly fancied it arose that love alighted only on gliding youth—that any love she might win would sink simultaneously with sand in the glass. She thought of it with an ever-growing consciousness of cruelty, which tended to breed actions of reckless unconventionality, framed to snatch a year's, a week's, even an hour's passion from anywhere it could be won. Through want of it she had sung without being merry, possessed without enjoying, outshone without triumphing. Her loneliness deepened her

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desire. On Egdon, coldest and meanest kisses were at famine prices ; and where was a mouth matching hers to be found ? . . . Her high gods were William the Conqueror, Strafford, and Napoleon Buonaparte, as they had appeared in the Lady's history used at the establishment in which she was educated. Had she been a mother she would have christened her boys such names as Soul or Sisera in preference to Jacob or David, neither of whom she admired. At school she had used to side with the Philistines in several battles, and had wondered if Pontius Pilate were as handsome as he was frank and fair. . . . She seldom schemed, but when she did scheme, her plans showed rather the comprehensive strategy of a general than the small arts called womanish, though she could utter oracles of Delphian ambiguity when she did not choose to be direct. In heaven she will probably sit between the Héloïses and the Cleopatras.¹

That was Eustacia in life ; in death ' the expression of her finely carved mouth was pleasant, as if a sense of dignity had just compelled her to leave off speaking.'

¹ *Return of the Native*, Book I, Chap. VII.

IV

POETRY

CONCLUDING WITH A NOTE ON DESTINY

LET us now turn to the more individual part of Thomas Hardy's literary fruitage. Mrs. Hardy has told me that 'speaking generally, there is more autobiography in a hundred lines of Mr. Hardy's poetry than in all the novels.' You have only to refer to his published volumes of verse in order to see the truth of this statement. I have already said that he practised the art of versification in his earlier years and returned to poetry in his latter life. If you read Hardy's novels, you must read his poems—if only because they are personal. They help you to understand the man. Here is a stanza from *Afterwards*—the last poem in the collected edition of his verse :—

“ If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, mothy
and warm,
When the hedgehog travels furtively over the
lawn,
One may say, ‘ He strove that such innocent crea-
tures should come to no harm
But he could do little for them ; and now he is
gone.” ”

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But his poems are something besides being personal ; they are the counterparts of the novels. The two are intimately and inextricably bound together. Look at these lines from *Lizbie Browne*, which is a Wessex Novel in miniature :—

‘ Dear Lizbie Browne,
Where are you now ?
In sun, in rain ?—
Or is your brow
Past joy, past pain,
Dear Lizbie Browne ?

But, Lizbie Browne,
I let you slip ;
Shaped not a sign,
Touched never your lip
With lip of mine,
Lost Lizbie Browne !

So, Lizbie Browne,
When on a day
Men speak of me
As not, you’ll say,
“ And who was he ? ”—
Yes, Lizbie Browne ! ’

Perhaps he gives us of his best when he sings of his friends. Here are two quotations from his noble elegy on Swinburne :—

‘ In this fair niche above the slumbering sea,
That sentrys up and down all night, all day,
From cove to promontory, from ness to bay,

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The Fates have fitly bidden that he should be
Pillowed eternally.

.
So here, beneath the waking constellations,
Where the waves peal their everlasting strains,
And their dull subterrene reverberations
Shake him when storms make mountains of their
plains—

Him once their peer in sad improvisations,
And deft as wind to cleave their frothy
manes—

I leave him, while the daylight gleam declines
Upon the capes and chines.'

The true lyric note is happiness. His sorrowful notes are marred by intermittent sobs, and yet—paradoxical though it may seem—it is in these sobs that his true muse asserts itself. He is unlike any other poet. His is an intense individuality. In a first reading his verse seems

‘fretted to dulcet jars,’

but further study will reveal the true poet. It will reveal that intensity which he has hammered into his lyrics, many of which are, doubtless, painful to the faithful and orthodox. This intensity is not always present, and there is even one jolly breeze that reminds you of Mr. Belloc's Sussex song. It is called *Great Things*.

In conclusion, let us turn to *The Dynasts*, that tremendous drama, titanic in its splendour, in which Napoleon and his chieftains and all earthly powers are

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shown to be but fretful midges in the awful vastness of space. They are but puppets in the hands of some blind, loveless, hateless Fate. This Fate is the Immanent will—the force which sustains the Universe : It has no purpose good or ill. *The Dynasts* is a work so stupendous in conception—a celestial survey of Europe during the Napoleonic period—that it almost seems to have been written for an audience of the gods. Historically considered it is amazingly accurate, and there is a fidelity in the most intimate touches. Apart from the supernatural agencies, the choruses of phantoms, it would be a wonderful chronicle play ; with them it ceases to be an earthly epic and becomes universal.

‘ Shade of Earth :

“ What of the Immanent Will and Its designs ? ”

Spirit of the years :

“ It works unconsciously, as heretofore,
Eternal artistries in circumstance,
Whose patterns, wrought by rapt æsthetic rote,
Seem in themselves Its single listless aim,
And not their consequence.” ’

And we are left seekers in the greatest problem of all.
If we cannot hope, we must not despair, for

“ “ A stirring thrills the air
Like to sounds of joyance there
That the rages
Of the ages

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Shall be cancelled, and deliverance offered from
the darts that were,
Consciousness the Will informing, till It fashion
all things fair ! ” ’

The last word is with faith, not irony.

I suppose that long before this you have guessed that one thing which seems to be predominant in the works of Thomas Hardy. It is this : In his characters we see man—great or little—burdened by a destiny ; the irony of circumstances and the indifference of fate, which he is unable to curse, bless, or defy. It is indiscriminately cold and passionless, and in its hands happiness seems sometimes but a jest. What is Destiny ? Real Destiny is character. But from whence springs this ‘ character ’ which so influences our lives ? As Hamlet says :—

‘ There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.¹

If it be now ’tis not to come ; if it be not to come,
it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will
come ; the readiness is all. . . .²

And all that can be said is that, in so far as is known, that ‘ divinity ’ is the result of heredity and environment. These two things cannot be overcome, and so it still is the destiny of some to be happy, and at least we are all entitled to hope that one day happiness may be ours, yet we must not allow this hope to bind false chains to our lives. We are left seekers in the greatest

¹ Act V., Sc. 2, line 10.

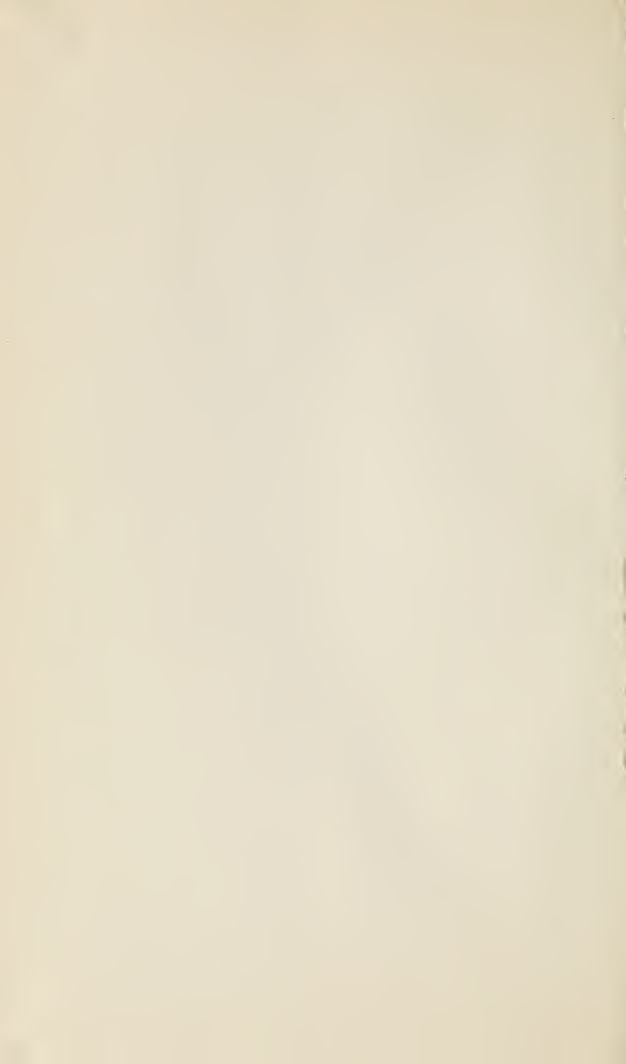
² *Ibid.*, line 230.

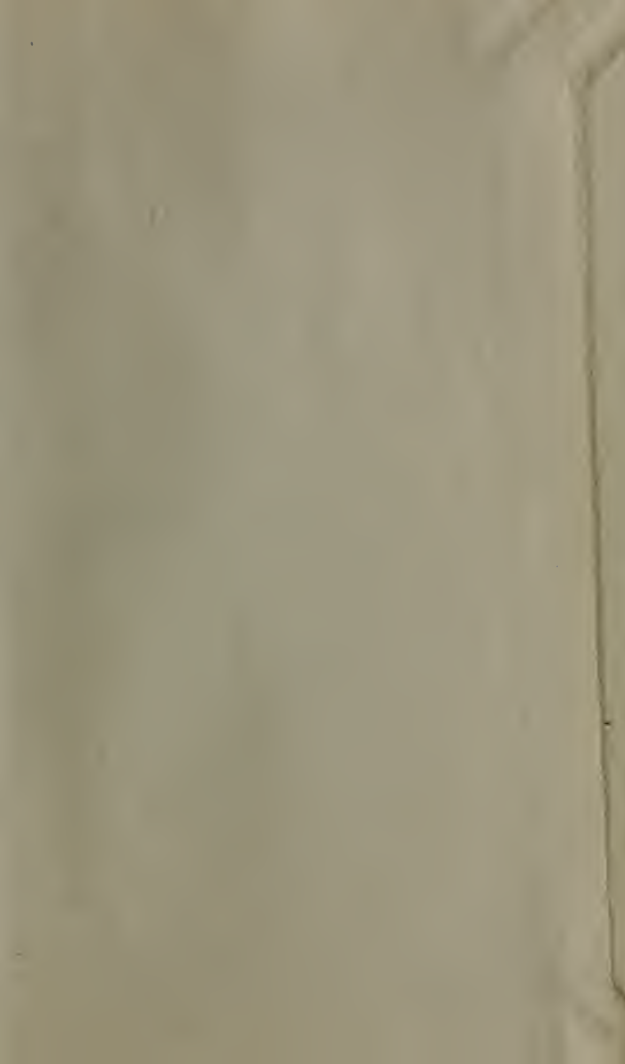
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problem of all, and Thomas Hardy leaves us courage
to face it all and enjoy of it what we can :

‘ Let me enjoy the earth no less
Because the all-enacting Might
That fashioned forth its loveliness
Had other aims than my delight.’

.
‘ And some day hence, toward paradise
And all its blest—if such should be—
I will lift glad, afar-off eyes ;
Though it contain no place for me.’





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